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A

CHRISTMAS SERMON

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BY

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A CHRISTMAS SERMON

I DO not know that any of our religious observances are more in harmony with the genius of Christianity and with the spirit of Him from whom it sprang than Christmas day, kept now almost universally as a day of gifts, of domestic festivities, as a day for children.

An original trait of the peerless character of Jesus was his reverence for Childhood. In its simplicity, in its absence of self-consciousness, in its readiness to trust, in its transparency, he beheld the qualities of the highest idea of human nature. He laid great stress upon childlikeness as essential to true goodness. Once when his disciples were disputing which of them should be the first in the glorious kingdom they were expecting him to establish, he called a little child to him and told them that unless they became

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like that child, they could not so much as enter the heavenly kingdom. Again, when he was surrounded by a great crowd, as he always was when he appeared in public, mothers with their little ones pressed through the throng, endeavouring to get near enough to him, for him to touch them, believing, such was the reverence with which he was regarded, that his simple touch would prove an amulet, protecting their children from all evil. The men around him, annoyed at being crowded upon by women and children, whom they looked upon as intruders, out of place there, rudely bade the women stand back and take their children away. Seeing how these mothers were treated, Jesus was much displeased, and he exclaimed, "Let the children come to me, of such is the kingdom of heaven." We are so familiar with these words that we do not think how they must have sounded at the time. The people about him supposed that they were relieving him of an annoyance; but he gave children a special welcome. He beheld in them a heavenly condition of being. Once more, when he made his entry into Jerusalem, children attended him shouting their Hosannas. Do not

these incidents speak, more pointedly than any description of him, of the benignity of his looks, and of his sympathy with the young?

That he had known the pleasures of childhood, and mingled with children at play, we learn from the illustration he once gave of the temper of the people of his day. "To what," said he, "shall I compare this generation? They are like children playing in the market place, or public square." Some propose to make believe a funeral, and mimic the men and women whom it was the custom in those days to employ at funerals to lament, and who are said to have imitated the signs of grief so cunningly that the beholders were moved to tears. But the other children are in no humour to play a funeral. Then it is proposed to play a wedding, a bridal procession with music and dancing. But neither is this acceptable. The children refuse to take part in it. There is no pleasing them. They are in no mood either for a funeral or a wedding. "We have piped for you to dance," say some of the children to their playmates, "but you will not dance. We have mourned for you, but you will not join in lamenting." How natural all this is! In

all times and places children delight to amuse themselves by imitating the ways of grown-up people. And how beautifully is this characteristic of childhood described by Wordsworth in his well known, immortal Ode, which I love to quote:

"Behold the child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' darling of a pigmy size!
See where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See at his feet some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly learnèd art,
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral,
And this hath now his heart."

And how naturally did Jesus avail himself of this fact to describe the people of his day, as represented by the ruling classes, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law! 'John had come,' he said in effect, 'neither eating nor drinking, living most abstemiously, and it was said that he was crazy, possessed by an evil spirit. I have come, eating and drinking like other people, neither observing nor enjoining any fasts, and I am called a wine-

drinker, an associate of the profligate and the vile. There is no pleasing them.' Does not all this show what an observer of life Jesus was, even to the ways and plays of children? And is it not eminently congenial with his character that his birthday should be, as it has become, the Holiday of the young?

It is generally thought that Christmas is not duly observed unless by formal religious services, unless the Churches are opened and the ceremonies of public worship are observed. It is far from my thought to object to keeping the day in that manner. When Christmas falls on a week-day let people go to Church, if they are so disposed. Let all go who can with willing minds.

But I question whether children, whose day it has specially become, would ever choose this way of observing it; a fact easily enough accounted for, if we believe what Christ never taught, the depravity of our nature. Let those who hold to that dogma, hateful to God and man, and to him especially who saw in children representatives of the dwellers in the spiritual kingdom,—let believers in that doctrine, I say, make what they can of the aversion of children to Churchgoing

on Christmas day. Any formal religious observance of it now is, to say the least, of quite secondary consideration. For Nature, the blessed instinct of humanity, has proved stronger than any dogmas, stronger than any unchristian-like asceticism, and has christened the birthday of Jesus, once for all and forever, a merry day. The ancient form of congratulation exchanged at this season was: "A merry Christmas to you!" All the power of mistaken ideas of Religion may be challenged to make it otherwise: a merry day, a day for mirth, for exultant, childlike joy. Children are the very creatures of merriment. Their delight, and the good God has made them so, is in noise and ringing laughter, and in the play of their limbs. We, grown-up people, have outgrown—happy is it for us if we have not forgotten—their simple pleasures, which are as dear to Heaven, and as sacred, as our hymns and prayers, dearer and more sacred than most hymns and prayers, for they are sincere and true.

Let children then take the lead at this festal season, and the birthday of the Lord Jesus be forever their holiday. Even as, when he was on

earth, he entered the great city amid the shouts of children, so, at the season that commemorates his entrance into life, let the venerable Idea of Christ come to us amidst the joyous music of children's voices. We, grown-up people, have wandered far from the heaven of our infancy. At this season let us turn our faces thitherward, and try to lose our worldly, sinful selves in sympathy with the young. So long as Childhood has an attraction for us, the child's heart is not wholly lost.

But, dear friends, while we acknowledge the special claims of the young at this season, we ought to have a more substantial reason for its observance than mere custom, venerable as the authority of custom is. This, I imagine, is with most people the sole reason for taking note of this anniversary. The personal claims of him whose advent it celebrates are hardly thought of. And yet it is his untold worth to mankind which gives occasion and authority to the observance and justifies its propriety.

How vague is the common idea of him! The popular representation of him as the Supreme

Divinity appeals to the imagination, but to no sympathies purely human. It blurs and confuses our thoughts of him and makes it impossible to conceive of him as our actual brother man, made in all points as we are. And the more liberal representation of him is almost as vague. Hardly an outline of his person is visible through the legendary and mythical mists, generated by the historical scepticism that marks our times. From the very first our peculiar form of faith has taken a negative position in regard to him. By which I mean that it has been content with affirming that Christ was not Almighty God himself. With the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, the fathers of our faith in New England came to no general agreement as to the person of Christ. Many of them, and Dr. Channing among the number, appear, at the first, to have been Arians. They held Christ to be a superangelic being, sent into the world from a pre-existent state of glory. Gradually, however, Humanitarianism so called, that is, the belief that he was simply a man, has become universal among liberal Christians.

But as a man, he is far from commanding the

deep interest that he should, partly because, as I have already intimated, a wide-spread historical scepticism has created doubts of the historical claims of the accounts that have come down to us in the Gospels, and partly because the distinguishing power of Christianity is considered to reside not so much in him personally as in his teachings, and it is thought a matter of little importance what is believed about him provided we accept what he taught.

Now to my thinking, as I have so often said to you, the essential, the divine, power of the Christian Faith resides not primarily in his teachings taken apart from him, but in Christ himself. He was far greater than his teachings, true and wise as they are. "The highest cannot be told in words." God communes with man not in human speech, but in Life. The Life of Jesus is the Divine Word, not in any mystical sense, but as every good man, every good thing, is a word of God. It is the person of Christ that has told, and is destined still to tell most powerfully upon the most sacred interests of mankind. A system of Morality and Religion as wise, as pure, as elevated as is contained in the Christian

Scriptures may be gathered from other ancient writings, from the Scriptures of other religions. But where shall we look for such a person as he was? Perfect truthfulness, fearless sincerity, the unsparing boldness of a reformer with the tenderness of a woman, unstipulating self-renunciation, unconquerable faith in God and in man, —in the character of Christ, these qualities live and breathe, and so naturally withal, that while we recognize them as divine, we feel no less deeply, when we read aright what is told of him, how thoroughly human they were, how native to our nature, weak and depraved as it may become. We kindle and glow in sympathy with the magnanimity manifested in a breathing brother man, and our very heart and flesh, melted into tears of revering admiration, cry out after it, and with aspirations that cannot be uttered, long to realize something of the divine beauty of that Great Life in our own poor lives.

He is the very soul of Christianity. Such is my idea of him. How often, for long years, I have dwelt upon it you all know. It seems to have been thought that I have rather fancied than found it. This is doing me altogether too much

honour. With all my self-conceit, and I have my full share, I never dreamed of being able to create so Godlike a vision. Oh no! dear friends, it is all, and a great deal more than all I have said, here, in these simple narratives of the New Testament. Here it is that an all-inspiring idea may be found of what manner of person Christ, our fullest Revelation of the Divine, was.

In order to feel the full power of the personal character of Christ, it is not enough that we content ourselves with a general recognition of his extraordinary moral greatness. Many who do not admit the historical truth of the Gospels, and look upon them as mere collections of legends or myths, still speak of Jesus in the loftiest terms, but where they get any direct personal knowledge of him I do not know. I suppose it is a matter of inference with them. From the vast consequences that have resulted from his appearance in the world, they infer his greatness. But I would that we might all see him, eye to eye, as it were, as he may be seen in the simple pages of the New Testament, that we might feel how divine was the human, how human the divine in him, and that it was our own very

nature that was unfolded in him, the bright, consummate flower of Humanity, filling the world with the odour of Divinity.

There is one characteristic of him, illustrating our human nature, apparent on every page of the Gospels. I refer to the closeness with which he kept himself in all his utterances to Nature and human Life. Dealing in no vague abstractions, in no mystical or metaphysical doctrines, he presented what he had to say in all manner of similitudes, parables, and correspondences with spiritual things, drawn from the objects, incidents, methods of nature and daily life. He made use of everything.

I pray you, friends, consider what this facile dealing with things implies. It shows, does it not? not only that he was a close observer of all that went on around him,—it gives us an insight into the very heart of him, and we see that his love of truth was so great, his enthusiasm for it was so constant and strong, he was so full of it that not only was he ready to give his life for it, but that it was visible to him everywhere. And what he saw he spoke. It broke from his lips, beamed from his eye, rung in his voice. It was throbbing in his very blood.

And how natural it was that so it should be with him! What a revelation is he of the great secret of life, namely this, that when one is devoted, heart and soul, to any good thing, to any great truth, he is brought into such a relation to all things, that they all conspire to suggest and corroborate it. All Nature and all Life are continually hinting at it. Illustrations of the beloved idea crowd upon the mind at every step. The whole world becomes vocal with it. The mountains and the hills break forth into singing it, and all the trees of the field wave their branches in harmony with the truth ringing in the soul.

For the most part, for the generality of us so languid is our interest in any good thing, that it takes very solemn occasions, very startling experiences, very pointed hints, to suggest any great, inspiring thought to us. Perhaps, for a while, at times, when we are confronted with the mystery of death, when the dear memory of some loved one departed is fresh and tender, we hold communion with the unseen, and all things visible speak to us of it. But to make us thoughtful, to make us feel, we must have special times and oc-

casions, Sabbaths and churches, and sacred music, and imposing ceremonies; and even these fail, O how often! to make more than a transient impression on us. To how many is Life no more than a monotonous routine, stirring no thought, kindling no enthusiasm, and the great Universe nothing but a dead machine! With lack-lustre eyes, we stand before the grand spectacle of Nature and Life, and "they haughtily return us stare for stare." We become as meaningless as everything else appears to us to be. We see no purpose in life, nothing to lift us up from the earth on which we grovel.

It is not those only who are advancing in years, to whom existence is a black void, and who hear only the sounds of perpetual decay. The young are found questioning whether life be worth the living, professing to despise it as a mocking shadow.

The reason of this most miserable state of mind,—is it not plain? It all comes from not having any good, true object, to which the heart warms with a generous enthusiasm. When you have such an aim, and you cherish it as worth living and dying for, then you have a vision of

the living God who reveals himself in all good things. And then your whole outlook is changed, and all around you throbs with a new life.

So was it with Jesus. Nothing could come within the sphere of his vision that was not illumined by the light that shone from within him. Not a gay bridal procession could pass, not a woman put leaven into bread, not a fisherman cast his net into the lake, not a group of children gather for play, not a flower bloom, not a seed germinate, not a raven fly, not a sparrow fall without bearing witness to the truth that possessed him.

Is it not, dear friends, most interesting to mark how he thus gave evidence to the supremacy of the truth in his own soul, all unconsciously on his part? To the very last, he showed, in the same characteristic manner, how ever present and commanding was his affection for it. So ever close to his heart was it that, in the blackest hour, when forsaken of every friend and confronted with a death of agony and shame, he found a similitude, than which, to all human seeming, nothing could be more far-fetched, and yet to him it was an ennobling inspiration. When Pilate

asked him if he were a king, his reply was, "Thou sayest it. I am a king!" How indomitable the faith, how profound the enthusiasm that could find, amidst the horrors of that hour, any likeness between his most forlorn estate and the lofty position of a king!

Yes, he was indeed a king most royally arrayed, although his was only a crown of thorns, and his throne was a cross. He conquered the world and made all things, the most adverse, tributary to his personal power. What a gift of God is he! Welcome, thrice welcome to young and old be the day that commemorates his coming!

I listened with hearty assent to our friend and pastor last Sunday. To what he then said, I take this occasion to add a word by way of supplement. The text, as those of you who were present will remember, was, "When thou makest a feast, call not your kinsmen and rich neighbours, but the poor, the maimed, the blind." I would remind you how very different the state of things is now from what it was in the time of Christ. Thanks to the humane spirit which he has breathed into the world, we have, what was not known in his

day, a great multitude of Almshouses, Hospitals, and Homes. There is hardly a form of suffering, for which a special charitable institution is not provided. Time would fail me, were I to attempt to enumerate all the charities of this kind that exist in this community alone. They are numbered by hundreds. And so it is everywhere in all the most advanced communities of Christendom; and nowhere do they abound more than in that city which we are wont to think of as given over to frivolity and pleasure, the city of Paris. And they are all administered, I believe, for the love of God, and for the sake of the suffering of all ages and classes. I have heard it said that the noble Hospital for Incurables is the happiest household in our city. And I know of a little Hospital for Children, very dear to me and mine, which is presided over by a care so tender and motherly that the little patients are as much benefited by it as by the medical treatment, and that has been eminently successful. By the way, I intend, dear friends, no melancholy suggestion, but my time here cannot now be long, and were this the last time of my speaking to you from the pulpit, I should make bold to

bequeath this Charity to the liberal remembrance of those who, in this Church and out of it, have so generously aided in its support.

I believe all our private charitable Institutions are alike administered in the spirit of Christian benevolence. How generously the poor have been remembered at this Christmas season, how munificent private charity has been, the public prints bear abundant witness.

It has been well said that endowed charitable Institutions are cut off from the sympathy of the Public. It is well that the people should be solicited to aid in the support of our Hospitals and Homes for the feeble. It exercises us in giving and keeps our humane sympathies in practice. A rich man, upon being asked to assist some charity, pleaded that he had not been educated in giving. We are bound to see to it that the education in this respect of our wealthy brothers is not neglected.

I wish I could say as much for our public as for our private Benevolent Institutions, which ought faithfully to represent the humanity of a Christian community. But ah! we know too well that they do not, that they are too apt to

become mere receptacles, into which the poor are huddled out of sight and sympathy. Is it strange that the poor dread them as so many pest-houses? Were the persons employed in them carefully selected for their kindness, for their patience, in a word, for the love of God, the poor, instead of shunning them, would flee to them, in their sore need, as to very temples of Mercy. I went once to see a poor boy at the General Hospital who had come back sick from the Mexican War. As I sat by his bedside, a man, one of the nurses came and tucked up the bed, and bent kindly over him and asked if there was anything he could do for him. But when the man went away, the lad turned to me with a faint smile and said, "I owe that attention to your presence. That man passed my bed again and again last night, and I begged him for a drink of water, but he gave no heed to me." It is this wretched eye-service that makes of none effect our public charities. Possibly the man was in attendance during the night upon cases that brooked no delay. I take bitter shame to myself that I made no complaint of him in the poor boy's behalf. I suppose my mind was

turned in a different direction by the occupant of the next bed, who, the boy said, had no friends to come and see him. After a while, I turned and spoke to the solitary sufferer, and asked him how he was. His unexpected reply was, "I might be worse, thank God!" So I saw that he was comfortable and needed no consolations of mine.

The poor we have always with us. And you and I are no better than that nurse in the Hospital, when, with our superabundant luxuries, we hurry on in our selfish devotion to our own ease and pleasure, and give no heed to the cry of suffering humanity. Would to God our eyes and hearts were unsealed, and we no longer regarded the appeals of the suffering as importunate intrusions, but felt ourselves too greatly privileged, too highly blest in our abounding opportunities of helping the cause of human welfare and happiness!

This Sermon was repeated by request the Sunday after Christmas, when the following, in substance, was added thereto:

Last Sunday our annual Collection, the only one made in the Church, was taken up, in behalf, as it always has been, of our Church Charities, than which I know of none in the City more faithfully administered. The work given to a hundred poor women and paid for weekly is not factitious. It is work done for Hospitals and Homes of every religious name, and for them thousands of garments have been already made. To such of the women as choose coal is sold at half price. Every Saturday a goodly class of young colored girls are taught to be seamstresses.

The money for the support of these Charities is freely given, without personal solicitation, (save by an annual notice from the pulpit,) by the attendants on the religious services of this Church.

This Charity is four times blessed. It blesses the poor women who do the work, the Hospitals and Homes for which it is done, it blesses you who give so cheerfully, and the faithful almoners

of your gifts. Nay, it is five times blessed. An unlooked-for blessing has come from the kindly relations created between this Church and the various religious denominations, whose Benevolent Associations have thus been aided, and whose acknowledgments of the aid received have been prompt and cordial.

The privilege of aiding our truly unsectarian catholic Charities is not confined to the occasion of the annual Collection, nor to the members of our Church. Donations from cheerful givers will always be gratefully received.

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